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AUTHOR Buxton, Toni
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ABSTRACT

This study examined communication apprehension (CA) as a potential barrier to student academic success. Prior research implicated CA as a primary predictor of both interpersonal and academic success. Based on the past research of J. McCroskey and others, it was hypothesized that high CA students would maintain lower grade point averages (GPA) and standardized test scores. Students in five basic public speaking classes were asked to complete the Personal Report of Academic Success (PRCA-24) and to report high school GPA, college GPA, and SAT scores. Results indicated that high CA students attain roughly equal or slightly higher GPAs and standardized test scores. An examination of these results suggests that CA has little negative impact on academic success of college students. (Contains 25 references and 3 tables of data.) (Author)

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Communication Apprehension and Its Impact on College Students' Success

Toni Buxton
The University of Central Florida
School of Communication
P.O. Box 161344
Orlando, Florida 32816-1344
(407) 331-0117
tmb26561@pegasus.cc.ucf.edu

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A paper presented at the the National Communication Association's Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois, November 1997.

Running Head: Communication Apprehension and Academic Success

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine communication apprehension (CA) as a potential barrier to student academic success. Prior research implicated CA as a primary predictor of both interpersonal and academic success. Based on the past research of McCroskey and others, it was hypothesized that high CA students would maintain lower grade point averages (GPA) and standardized test scores. Students in five basic public speaking classes were asked to complete the Personal Report of Academic Success (PRCA-24) and to report high school GPA, college GPA, and SAT scores. Results indicated that high CA students attain roughly equal or slightly higher GPAs and standardized test scores. An examination of these results suggests that CA has little negative impact on academic success of college students.

Communication Apprehension and Its Impact on College Students' Success

McCroskey (1970, p. 270) defined communication apprehension (CA) as "a broadly based anxiety related to oral communication." He later revised this view to show that CA is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977a, p. 78; 1977b, p. 28).

When McCroskey (1970) originally advanced the construct of CA, he referred only to CA as a trait of an individual. There have been other studies that have examined another approach to CA. Gilkinson (1942) studied stage fright through the use of the Personal Report of Confidence as a Speaker. This and other studies led to McCroskey's examination of CA.

Much research of CA has focused on a dichotomous trait/state view of apprehension. McCroskey (1982) rejects this dichotomy and instead suggests that CA is a continuum ranging from the extreme trait pole to the extreme state pole, although neither the pure state nor pure trait probably exists. There are four points along the continuum that can be identified. Traitlike CA is viewed as "a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts" (p. 147). The term traitlike is used in place of the more commonly found trait due to the fact that no personality variable has been found to have universal predictability across all situations for all people. This is the type of research that has been most researched over the past two decades.

The next point along the continuum is generalized-context CA. According to McCroskey (1982, p. 147), generalized-context CA is "a relatively enduring personality-type orientation toward communication in a given type of context." This type of CA is based on apprehension within various settings, from public speaking, to meetings, to small groups, and in dyads. The distinction between traitlike and generalized-context CA is that traitlike CA focuses on communication across contexts, and generalized-context focuses more narrowly on communication in a given context.

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Person-group CA, the next point on the continuum, is viewed as "a relatively enduring orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1982, p. 148). Some groups cause a person to be highly apprehensive, while other groups cause little or no apprehension. For example, a student may feel apprehensive when communicating with a teacher, but have no apprehension when communicating with peers.

The final point on the CA continuum is situational CA. Situational CA is "a transitory orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1982, p. 149). This type of CA fluctuates widely as the situation changes.

Causes of Traitlike CA

There is little research regarding the causes of CA. According to McCroskey (1982), recent writers have acknowledged that there may be a hereditary contribution to CA, although there is not a CA gene. McCroskey and Richmond (1980) summarized the research:

> Researchers in the area of social biology have established that significant social traits can be measured in infants shortly after birth, and that infants differ sharply from each other on these traits. One of these traits is referred to as "sociability," which is believed to be a predisposition directly related to adult sociability - the degree to which we reach out to other people and respond positively to contact with other people. Research with identical twins and fraternal twins of the same sex reinforces this theoretical role of heredity. Identical twins are biologically identical, whereas fraternal twins are not. Thus, if differences between twins raised in the same environment are found to exist, biology (heredity) can be discounted as a cause in one case but not in the other. Actual research has indicated that biologically identical twins are much more similar in sociability than are fraternal twins. This research would be interesting if it were conducted only on twin infants, but it is even more so because it was conducted on a large sample of adult twins who had the opportunity to have many different and varied social experiences. (p. 6)

McCroskey (1982) also suggests that reinforcement in communication experiences and modeling are possible causes for CA. If a child's communication is rewarded, then the child will tend to communicate more often. But if that child is not reinforced, the child will communicate less.

Modeling theory suggests that children observe the communication patterns of others in the environment and attempt to emulate it. If this behavior is reinforced, the behavior continues. If it is not reinforced, the children change the way they behave (McCroskey, 1982).

Effects of Communication Apprehension

McCroskey (1977a) points out that people who experience high levels of CA have three major effects of this apprehension in their lives. First, people who experience high CA levels avoid communication whenever possible. Second, as a result of communication avoidance, high CAs are perceived less positively by others than people who experience lower levels of CA. Finally, as a result of communication avoidance, and in conjunction with others' negative perceptions of them, people who experience high CA levels will be negatively impacted in terms of economic, academic, political, and social lives.

Three patterns of behavioral response to high CA are usually applicable. The first is communication avoidance. According to McCroskey (1982) this is also known as a "fight" or "flight" choice. One can expect high CAs to choose the flight option when confronted with an uncomfortable experience.

The second behavioral pattern is communication withdrawal (McCroskey, 1982). In this type of circumstance, when a person with high levels of CA is unable to avoid a particular communication experience, the high CA will simply choose to communicate as little as possible. This may be represented as total silence, talking only as much as is required by the situation, a short speech, or no initiation of discussion.

The third behavior pattern is communication disruption (McCroskey, 1982). This pattern of behavior is characterized by disfluencies in verbal presentation or unnatural nonverbal behaviors. This could be displayed as stuttering or use of "um" and "uh" during a speech.

Methods of Overcoming CA

The method most often used to help people overcome communication apprehension is requiring an individual to speak in public. While this method is useful to people with low or moderate levels of CA, it has been demonstrated to be not only ineffective, but it could be harmful to the high CA individual. This effect is demonstrated by students who faint during a speech, disappear on speech days, vomit, or who claim not to be ready (McCroskey, 1977a).

Another method for overcoming CA is systematic desensitization (McCroskey, 1972). This method is a form of applied behavior therapy designed to allay human neuroses, which involves getting to a state of deep muscle relaxation and then associating thoughts of public speaking with the relaxed state. It may be employed by educators, but it is advisable to include at least one person with a background in counseling or clinical psychology.

Visualization is another method of coping with communication anxiety (Ayres & Hopf, 1990). Visualization or imaging encourages positive thoughts about the public speaking situation by taking individuals through a carefully worded script in which they imagine themselves giving successful speeches (Ayres & Hopf, 1985; 1993; Ayres, Hopf & Ayres, 1994). Ayres and Hopf (1993) focus their attention on the visualization technique to encourage cognitive modification. They first get students into a relaxed mood by closing their eyes, breathing and sitting comfortably. Next, the instructor takes the students through a scripted reading of a successful delivery of a speech from start to finish. Because visualization is scripted, researchers can be quickly trained to use it and it requires less time to implement than many other measures (Byers & Weber, 1995).

The speech preparation process has been examined as a means to reduce anxiety in a public speaking setting. Ayres (1996) found that high CA students spent proportionally more time in total

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preparation, but less time in communication-based preparation. He suggests an intervention strategy of not only teaching communication strategy in a basic public speaking course, but also placing an emphasis on preparation strategies that will enhance the resultant public speech. In an effort to better understand CA in a classroom setting, Menzel and Carrell (1994) rated the content and delivery of speeches and compared them to survey responses. They found that the cumulative grade point average, total preparation time, rehearsal for an audience, and state anxiety to be significant predictors of the quality of the speech performance.

Proctor II, Douglas, Garera-Izquierdo & Wartman (1994) offered several suggestions to instructors for helping students with high CA to overcome their fear. Instructors should "(a) be private and personal [when suggesting that students seek help], (b) identify positives before negatives, (c) be specific rather than general [in identifying problems that the student is having in class], and (d) note that other students are also being encouraged to visit the [speech] lab. For schools without labs or special programs, these same suggestions can be useful for instructor who want to offer personal assistance to high-CA students" (p. 319).

Communication Apprehension and Academic Success

There has been substantial research concerning the relationship of communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970, 1982, 1984) with college students' academic success (McCroskey, 1977b; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989). Monroe & Borzi (1988) found that high-school seniors with high levels of CA were less likely to attend college than those with low CA. McCroskey and Anderson (1976) found that college students with high CA had significantly lower grade point averages than those students with low CA scores. Davis and Scott (1978) found that communication apprehension and intelligence were correlated and have an impact on academic achievement.

McCroskey et. al. (1989), in a four-year study at West Virginia University, discovered that CA has a negative impact on both academic achievement and retention. They also found that even for those students who drop out, high CA leads to even lower GPA compared to low CA drop-

outs. Communication apprehension leads to an "approach-avoidance chase" between instructors and apprehensive students, wherein instructors encourage highly apprehensive students to seek extra help. This suggestion could very well cause the high CA student to feel anxious, or even drop out of the class (Proctor II, Douglas, Garera-Izquierdo & Wartman, 1994).

Rubin, Graham, and Mignerey (1990), in their four-year study of communication competencies of 50 college freshmen, concluded that high CA students who were more apprehensive than their peers in their first two years either became less apprehensive during their junior year or did not graduate.

Ericson and Gardner (1992) found that high CA students were significantly more likely to drop out compared to low CA students and tended to drop out significantly more after only one year, but there was no apparent difference in GPA between high and low CAs.

Nelson, Scott and Bryan (1984) attempted to predict success in the first year of college by examining 22 variables of early college experiences. The intention was to find an intervention to keep students in school, but the biggest obstacle is the timing of the information gathering, and subsequently, the intervention.

Success was also found to be related to class size and involvement with the instructor. McCroskey and Anderson (1976) found that high CA students did worse academically than low CA students in traditional, relatively small, single-teacher classes. McCroskey and Sheahan (1978) found that high CA students were likely to avoid settings in which oral communication was required. High CA individuals were less effective in attending to, comprehending, and remembering class content (Booth-Butterfield, 1988). Davis and Scott (1978) found that communication apprehension is most associated with standardized achievement, rather than GPA.

Although several studies have found relationships between CA and academic success (McCroskey, 1977b; Davis & Scott, 1978; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989), there is also a substantial body of literature which rejects that premise. Watson and Monroe (1990) studied the relationships of intelligence quotient (IQ), communication apprehension, and teacher

perception among students in grades 8 through 12. They found that student-reported CA is not significantly correlated with academic achievement. In fact, the authors suggested that high CA students pay more attention to authority and complete assignments more conscientiously, but still have difficulty asking for assistance or interacting in the same academic setting.

Ericson and Gardner (1992) suggested that there may be no relationship between CA and academic success, or if there is a relationship, it is not a causative factor. They found no significant differences between levels of CA and GPAs in their four-year study.

Researchers attempt to determine if there is any relationship between levels of communication apprehension and academic success. If apprehension can be dealt with, higher levels of academic success can be achieved. The hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Students with high trait CA will attain lower grade point averages in high school than students with low trait CA.

H2: Students with high trait CA will attain lower grade point averages in college than students with low trait CA.

H3: Students with high trait CA will attain lower standardized test scores than students with low trait CA.

Methodology

Subjects

Students in five sections (n=124) of a basic public speaking course at a metropolitan university in the South were invited to participate in survey research to determine the level of state and trait communication apprehension, as well as academic achievement.

Measurement

The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1982) was used to determine trait CA. The obtained mean was 59.8 with a standard deviation of 16.6.

In order to determine levels of success, students were asked to report their high school GPA, college GPA, and standardized test scores (see Appendix A). The GPA was based on the

familiar four-point scale. The Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) was used as the measure of standardized test scores due to the finding that the American College Test (ACT) is not as widely used as the SAT (Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984). Students were instructed to read the directions and complete the surveys. One special instruction was made before completing the survey: the students were instructed to include the cumulative score off to the right of the question in addition to answering the questions listed. Students were advised that their answers would be confidential and used only for research purposes.

Data Design and Analysis

The independent variable was the student's level of CA. The levels (high, moderate, and low) were determined by standard deviation splits on the PRCA. The mean score was 59.8 and the standard deviation was 16.6. Based on this, subjects scoring above 76 were classified as "high CA" ($\underline{n}$=17), while those students scoring below 43 were classified as "low CA" ($\underline{n}$=18). Remaining students were classified as "moderate CA" ($\underline{n}$=89). ANOVA was used to assess the differences between the groups.

Results

Table 1 presents the high school grade point averages, college grade point averages, and SAT scores by level of CA. The data indicate students with high levels of apprehension do not have a significantly higher GPA in college than students with moderate or low apprehension levels. Students with moderate to high CA demonstrate approximately equal success in high school and on SAT scores, but high CA students reported significantly higher GPA than those with low GPA. Low CA students did not score significantly higher on SAT tests or college GPA than high or moderate apprehensives, but maintained a much lower high school GPA.

Tables 2 and 3 represent the relationship of the individual variables of high school GPA, college GPA, and SAT scores upon CA level. Collectively, they are significant at $p<0.015$, and broken down, HS GPA is significant at $p<0.014$.

Discussion

Students with high CA demonstrated an equal or slightly higher level of success than students with moderate levels of apprehension. It has been suggested by Ayers (1996) that students with high CA levels spend more time preparing for their speeches, which could be viewed as a compensation technique. Zorn (1993) states that their anxiety motivates them to prepare, thus explaining the higher grade point averages. Ericson and Gardner (1992) assert that there may be a "compensatory mechanism" that allows highly apprehensive students to overcome common avoidance behaviors. They accept their speech requirement because it is viewed as a temporary obstacle. As noted earlier, Watson and Monroe (1990) argue that high levels of CA cause students to work harder and complete assignments more consistently than those students with lower levels of apprehension. Watson and Monroe (1990) state that:

> The positive and negative results of CA may at the same time help and hinder student achievement and cancel the effects of each . . . CA students may compensate for the characteristics and limitations caused by this phenomenon . . . . (p. 34)

Similarities in the GPAs of the groups may be due in part to the type of student enrolled at the institution. Additionally, the students surveyed were enrolled in a basic public speaking course, a requirement to obtain a bachelor's degree from this university. It has been demonstrated that highly apprehensive students tend to avoid classes that pose a threat to them, which may have caused this sample to be unrepresentative of the students at the university. Additionally, highly apprehensive students have the option to enroll in a special "high ap" section of the basic public speaking course at this specific institution, making the sample used slightly less representative of the general population of the university. Future researchers should survey subjects outside of a communication classroom.

A limitation of this study is the fact that the data were collected at only one point in time. If the subjects were studied over a period of time, it would be more easily determined if the levels of success found in this study persisted over time.

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Another limitation is that the data were self-reported. The PRCA survey answers may have been biased based on the students' desire to be perceived as competent communicators, or fear that their grade may be affected by the responses they provided. Many of the students did not recall their individual math and verbal scores on the SAT test, so they were asked to include the cumulative score for the test. Future researchers may consider collecting the academic data from an official source, such as from the university registrar or admissions department.

Future research should focus on dropout rates of students with high levels of CA. One reason that the success rate of high CAs as measured by this study was basically equivalent to those students with moderate and low CA levels could be that high CA students with low grade point averages dropped out of school. It has been determined that students with high levels of CA are more likely to drop out of school (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989; Ericson & Gardner, 1992).

The implications for this area of research lie in possible intervention work. McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne (1989) explained, "CA should not be expected to contribute to a major source of variance for the achievement and success of an overall students body" (p. 105). However, the benefits of reducing levels of CA extend beyond the scope of success in college to other aspects of daily life. If students with high levels of apprehension can be identified easily, instructors can then begin to take steps to ease the apprehension that is experienced in the academic setting. Although the subjects of this study do not demonstrate a lack of success in college, past research shows that if apprehension levels are eased, there is a potential for greater success in academics, and indeed in various aspects of everyday life (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989). Students are more likely to persist in their studies, rather than drop out of school to avoid the stress of communication in school.

Interventions may increase the likelihood that highly apprehensive students complete school, since McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne (1989) and Ericson and Gardner (1992) found that high CAs have a greater tendency to drop out of school, even though the average GPA

is roughly equal to that of low and moderate CA students.

It is important to note that forcing highly apprehensive students to participate can be harmful to the student. And although most instructors would not intentionally harm students, many are not aware of the potential harm that they can cause to the students by forcing communication from an apprehensive. Previously mentioned interventions such as visualization, speech desensitization, and preparation techniques may be emphasized to instructors as a way of dealing with participation requirement or oral assignments.

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Table 1

High School GPA, College GPA and SAT Score by Level of Apprehension

Level of Apprehension	High School GPA[a]	College GPA[b]	SAT Scores
High CA	3.55	3.21	1067
Moderate CA	3.55	3.16	1068
Low CA	3.15	2.96	1101

[a] $p<.05$

[b] $p = .1468$

Table 2

ANOVA of High School GPA, College GPA, and SAT Scores and Level of Apprehension

	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F
Regression	3	2.857	.952	3.659*
Residual	96	24.983	.260	
Total	99	27.840		

Dependent Variable: Level of Apprehension

Independent Variables: (Constant), HS GPA, College GPA, SAT Scores

*p<.05

Table 3

Coefficients of ANOVA of Apprehension Level

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	2.691	0.487		5.524	0.000	1.724	3.658
HS GPA	-0.278	0.111	-0.263	-2.512	0.014	-0.497	-0.058
College GPA	-0.162	0.130	-0.139	-1.244	0.217	-0.419	0.096
SAT Scores	7.75E-04	0.000	0.209	1.925	0.057	0.000	0.002

Dependent Variable: Level of Apprehension

Independent Variables: (Constant), HS GPA, College GPA, SAT Scores

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